

Editor's Note

In the year 2000, the Center for Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai'i celebrated its fiftieth anniversary at its twenty-fifth annual conference. This special issue honors that auspicious occasion.

Titled "Honoring the Past, Creating the Future," the 2000 conference provided an opportunity to pay tribute to the former leaders of the center (which began in 1950 as the Pacific Islands Studies Program): Douglas Oliver, Norman Meller, and Leonard Mason. Robert C Kiste, center director at the time, gave a keynote address outlining the long life of the center, from its humble beginnings to the present. Other featured speakers presented papers on issues that the conference planning committee (consisting of the center's faculty, Terence Wesley-Smith, Letitia Hickson, Linley Chapman, and myself) had identified as most pressing for the future of Pacific studies. These issues fall under the following topics: Decolonizing Pacific Studies, Interdisciplinary Approaches, and New Technologies. The idea of regional collaboration among different educational institutions to address these issues or to facilitate other opportunities was also one we felt worthy of exploration.

Preconference discussions of the issues were held on the UH Mānoa campus as well as via the center's website, and some of the articles in this issue make reference to this exchange of ideas. The planning committee also decided that artistic and cultural aspects of Oceania were just as important as intellectual discussion. With this in mind, the center brought to Hawai'i artists and performers from the Oceania Arts and Culture Center at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. Their multimedia production, led by Epeli Hau'ofa, Katerina Teaiwa, and Alan Alo, created quite a buzz at the conference, with its innovative and imaginative use of old and new forms (dance, poetry, slide and video projections, creative choreography, voice-overs, and various fusions of movement and sound). The conference also included live performances of Oceanic poetry by Sia Figiel, Teresia Teaiwa, Richard Hamasaki, and Haunani-Kay Trask, and launched *Terenesia*, a CD of sung and chanted poetry.

During the conference, it became clear that to better understand the contemporary Pacific, we should look not only to academic research and

writing, but also to the arts for the most exciting innovations and representations of the Pacific. Also, whereas academic papers are read by a relatively small and elite group, the best of the arts can reach masses of people, in the region and internationally.

DECOLONIZING PACIFIC STUDIES

Konai Helu Thaman, professor of education at the University of the South Pacific and, at the time, head of the School of Humanities, was chosen to speak because of her pioneering work in indigenous education, particularly her efforts to infuse classroom instruction with Pacific ways of teaching and learning. The second featured speaker was David Hanlon, a well-known Pacific historian and outstanding classroom instructor at the University of Hawai'i (and now director of the UH Center for Pacific Islands Studies).

Thaman's article speaks eloquently of the wisdom inherent in indigenous epistemologies (or ways of knowing) and the marginalization of this wisdom by educational institutions. Although she recognizes the importance of other sources of wisdom, including those from the West, her philosophy is to anchor the learning experience in the student's own culture, in much the same way that her teaching is "sourced from different cultures and traditions but rooted in Tongan culture."

Hanlon discusses several different ways of learning about or recording the Pacific past, concluding that the written word is but one way of doing history. He begins with a historical incident on Pohnpei punctuated by a Pohnpeian woman's remark, after witnessing the rain wash away the ink on the printed pages of a book, that "the history of the white man was no good because it washed away with the rain." This remark underscores the wide chasm between traditional Pacific ways of doing history and the practice of the academy where written history remains the primary medium through which we learn about the past. Moreover, we judge our students primarily on their ability to write. If things are to change, then we must examine the power inequities and the forces that would work against Hanlon's claim that history can be "sung, danced, chanted, spoken, carved, woven, painted, sculpted, and rapped." Although we believe this to be true—and we know that in the Pacific these forms are not only practiced but have potency—the reality is that such artistic forms have not yet infiltrated classroom or academic practice. Meanwhile, the written word con-

tinues to dominate the study and practice of Pacific history as well as Pacific studies in general. Thaman tells us, "The challenge . . . is not whether incorporating indigenous perspectives and wisdom in higher education is right or wrong, but whether we are ready to give other ways and other voices a chance." As the gatekeepers of the study of the Pacific, are we ready to give Oceanic forms of historical expression equal time and value with the written word in our classrooms? My hope is that as we begin a new millennium, we will open wide the doors of the academy to embrace wholeheartedly indigenous ways of studying and learning about the Pacific.

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

If we search Pacific studies programs, we are unlikely to find clear guidelines on the nature of interdisciplinary work. How do interdisciplinary approaches differ from multidisciplinary studies? Are there existing models of interdisciplinary research in Pacific studies that our students can emulate?

Because of his engagement in interdisciplinary work we invited Edvard Hviding, social anthropologist at the University of Bergen, to reflect on his experiences. His article addresses past and recent developments in the field as well as general principles and approaches to interdisciplinary research. A second article on the topic, which I prepared, deals specifically with a historical event using an interdisciplinary lens. The two papers complement and reinforce each other. Hviding lays the groundwork and provides a theoretical context for understanding interdisciplinary research and its political role in the contemporary Pacific. He discusses at length how interdisciplinary research can be organized, drawing on experiences in academic and civic life as well as interactions in the Solomon Islands to demonstrate his thinking. My paper is an attempt to explore the interplay between interdisciplinary research, writing, and knowledge.

Judging from the discussions held during the conference, there is no agreement on the nature, form, and structure of interdisciplinary work. For most, it means drawing from multiple disciplines. Hviding challenges us to think differently. He outlines in clear terms what interdisciplinarity is about. For him, it is about working in the spaces between disciplines and incorporating indigenous knowledges from the Pacific. This begs the question: How does one actually demonstrate working in those spaces?

And given the academy's tendency to ignore indigenous epistemologies, how do we revolutionize the system so that Pacific epistemologies are located at the center of Pacific studies rather than at the periphery?

Interdisciplinarity is perhaps the most troubling issue in Pacific studies. No wonder Hviding writes: "Persistent skepticism within university departments toward interdisciplinary teaching and research programs appears to be a worldwide phenomenon." Only when we can explain the nature of interdisciplinary work with conviction and clarity, and demonstrate its value to understanding our common humanity and environment, will skepticism disappear. Meanwhile, those of us in interdisciplinary programs have a responsibility (to our students and our communities particularly) to increase our efforts to define clearly our intellectual and academic position vis-à-vis other disciplines. The two articles that appear here are attempts to open up a conversation on this important issue.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND PACIFIC STUDIES

Two separate but important projects currently carrying out work in the new technologies, sometimes called new media, provide relevant experience and data for our consideration. The first is the Labyrinth Project at the University of Southern California's Annenberg Center for Communication; the second is the Moving Cultures Project at the UH School of Hawaiian, Asian, and Pacific Studies. The directors of these two projects, Marsha Kinder and Terence Wesley-Smith, prepared and delivered papers that provoked animated discussion on the future of Pacific studies.

Historically, Pacific Islanders have always been open to new technology (whether iron nails, guns, textiles, etc.) and more interested in whether or not it would enhance their quality of life than whether it came from their ancestors or from beyond their shores. Similarly, many Pacific Islanders today, particularly those who live in urban centers, have embraced the Internet and the World Wide Web with enthusiasm. The new media have radically changed the way the Pacific is being re-presented to the rest of the world. Likewise, international news and global events have found their way into many Island homes. Because of increasing globalization, it is imperative that Pacific studies employ new media to develop and further its mission to educate students and the general public about the Pacific. If we don't embrace the new media and harness them to serve our goals, we risk being marginalized yet again.

Kinder offers another important reason for engagement, which is the

imperative to “oppose hegemonic paradigms.” She believes that it is urgent to do so now, “when new narrative, technological, and pedagogical forms are still in flux.” Kinder’s extensive knowledge about and experience with new media provide us in Pacific studies a vision of future possibilities. The choices are ours to make. One choice that has been made, and is explicated in Wesley-Smith’s article, is distance learning. This form of teaching can open up interactive exchanges with students all over the Pacific at relatively little cost. But in addition to the benefits, both Kinder and Wesley-Smith discuss the drawbacks of using cyberspace. Kinder warns that distance learning can create “another form of academic divide,” one in which the rich go to college for face-to-face instruction while the poor must settle for learning at a distance. In another unfavorable scenario, distance learning becomes more about training than educating students, particularly when faculty relinquish the design of their classes to technicians and become merely “content providers.”

Wesley-Smith’s account of his recent experience with this innovative approach (for Pacific studies) points toward further exploration and collaboration with other institutions of higher learning, many of whom are identified in Stewart Firth’s article. One of the most compelling reasons for using the Internet is the ways in which distance learning makes students more responsible for their learning. Wesley-Smith claims this practice “can hasten the decolonization of the field by encouraging more open-ended, flexible, and empowering modes of teaching and learning.” The kinds of possible interactions across vast distances, and the close collaboration of several academic institutions (in Fiji, Hawai‘i, and New Zealand) in the teaching of Pacific studies, happened because of significant funding from the Ford Foundation coupled with the foresight of its organizers. Student evaluations from New Zealand and Hawai‘i suggest that email exchanges between the two groups enhanced the learning process, and on the whole, the experience is worth repeating and developing.

REGIONAL COLLABORATIONS

Drawing from his experiences working at different institutions in the region, Stewart Firth, professor in the Department of History and Politics in the School of Social and Economic Development at the University of the South Pacific, prepared a paper identifying several programs worldwide that engage in Pacific studies teaching and research. He sees a difference in emphasis between sites where Pacific studies is conceptualized as cultural

renaissance—especially in places where native people are not in charge of their destiny (New Zealand and Hawai‘i)—and others where Pacific studies is more about modernization and development. Although Firth focuses on difference, both views arise from the same impulse: a desire to improve the quality of life for native peoples. When independent nations such as Fiji reach the point where a majority of their people can no longer speak their native tongues, they will wake up and realize, hopefully not too late, that human beings cannot live on bread alone. A case in point is a recent shift at the University of the South Pacific where after years of marginalization a Pacific studies course is now mandatory for incoming students. Is this because the university (and by implication USP member countries) is only now realizing the importance of culture, language, and the arts to its future?

Firth advocates the formation of a regional consortium of Pacific studies centers that emphasize exchanges of every kind: “information on the Internet, of staff, of courses and simulations, and of students.” Such a model of reciprocal exchange exists within Pacific communities in the Islands; how this model expands and translates into a modern context is something Pacific studies could and should explore in the immediate future.

A DOCTORATE IN PACIFIC STUDIES?

During the final panel of the 2000 conference, I announced publicly the need for a PhD program in Pacific studies. The strongest argument for a PhD program is the symbolic value of this degree. It will send out a message to the rest of the world that Pacific studies, like American or Greek studies, is worthy of scholarly scrutiny at the highest level. The PhD is the fire that the Polynesian hero Maui brings back to the world of the living after his dangerous and life-threatening adventure in the underworld. It is, to use another potent metaphor, the fine mat of academia, and our students deserve this treasure, if they are prepared to work hard for it.

The Center for Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai‘i is an obvious place for such a program, because of funding support, location, and the large resource pool of Pacific specialists who work there. Moreover, the UH Hamilton Library has the most comprehensive collection of Pacific materials in the world. At present, graduates with a master’s degree in Pacific studies who want to pursue a doctorate have no choice but to

knock on the door of anthropology, history, or another discipline in the social sciences or the humanities. If we really believe in the importance of interdisciplinary scholarship, then we must demonstrate this belief by offering such a program. Armed with PhDs, trained in interdisciplinary work at the highest intellectual level, our students will be ready and waiting to take over leadership when we retire. If our training of students in Pacific studies at the masters and doctorate levels is truly of the kind advocated by Hviding, the next leaders in Pacific studies centers in the region and beyond will be scholars steeped in interdisciplinary research. Part of the reason our understanding of interdisciplinarity has not developed further is that it has not been championed at the highest academic level. More than ever before, we need rigorous interdisciplinary research, because as we move into a future fraught with conflict and possible annihilation, the research that happens in the spaces between disciplines, where invisible lines connect relationships between and among people, as well as between people and their environment, is what might save us from each other, or from ourselves.

THE ARTS

Without the arts, we have Pacific studies without soul. To be truly dynamic, alive, and transformative, Pacific studies needs the arts to give it humanity. The need for both intellectual and artistic exploration has been amply demonstrated in numerous conferences over the years, including the center's 2000 conference. Similarly, the art reproduced on the front cover and between the articles in this special issue speaks more to our hearts than to our heads. These images remind us of a way of relating to the Pacific world other than through academic research and writing. Strong, sensual, and bold, these images wink at us, inviting us to enter a different way of knowing the contemporary Pacific. Somewhere, in the spaces between these ways of knowing, we could discover important truths about the contemporary Pacific.

CREATING THE FUTURE

The articles from the 2000 conference that appear herein provide us with a map that directs us back to the future. When I think about Pacific studies and what will keep me engaged and enthused about teaching and learn-

ing, I imagine a PhD program, hosted at the University of Hawai'i, but with support from other similar programs in the Pacific, the continental United States, and Europe. I see students with fresh, eager faces, huddled together, engaged in animated conversation, their professors listening, rapt. The topic? Decolonizing Pacific Studies in its various forms, using interdisciplinary tools to mine the wisdom hidden in spaces between different knowledge systems, and employing new media to teach, explore, and provoke debate on an Oceania that is always in flux.

Read on, for a fuller and better understanding of Pacific studies—past, present, and future.

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